

Published: June 26, 2013, *Kokomo Tribune* [Page: A5]

www.kokomotribune.com/opinion/article_10726e72-f534-5390-a04e-f717e9b89ebb.html



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Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor



Submitted photo

LEGEND: James Gandolfini Made us feel empathy for a killer.

House of Burgess: Long live Tony Soprano

Actor James Gandolfini died last week at 51.

By Rob Burgess

Tribune night editor

On Jan. 10, 1999, television changed forever. I was a sophomore in high school. It was a Sunday night. I probably should have been asleep.

Instead, I was in my room watching HBO. A new show was premiering. I had heard bits and pieces about the premise — a depressed mob boss visits a shrink — but I knew little else. I was hooked by the time the title sequence — in which the protagonist drives from New York City to his home in New Jersey — finished with the words: “The Sopranos.” What I observed for the next hour exploded everything I thought I knew about television.

I recalled this teenage memory June 19 when I first heard James Gandolfini — the actor who had given life to main character Tony Soprano — died in Italy of an apparent heart attack. He was only 51. It’s hard to imagine the thespian who portrayed Tony Soprano died, because it doesn’t seem possible he was ever born.

Gandolfini’s sad-eyed demeanor seemed to be carved out of granite that had been first fashioned in a faraway epoch. There is something elemental about the entire enterprise. I have always thought the setting of “The Sopranos” could be changed to any point in history without the actors or (most of) the dialogue changing, and it would still be one of the best shows ever. (For

example, I always thought it would be interesting to transport the show to Roman times.) It was a timeless story, but it needed actors up to the challenge. Therein lies Gandolfini's importance.

To understand the reason Gandolfini is such an icon in the history of the small screen, look no farther than the crop of critically lauded shows that followed it: "Mad Men" (whose creator, Matthew Weiner, also worked on "The Sopranos"), "Breaking Bad," "Six Feet Under," "The Wire," "Dexter," "Weeds." The list goes on and on and on. None of the programs I listed could have possibly existed without "The Sopranos." Tony Soprano gave everyone from Don Draper to Dexter Morgan to Walter White room to breathe. Say hello to the bad guy: He's got emotions too.

Yes, Tony Soprano did terrible things. But it's a credit to Gandolfini's mastery that he was able to provide the viewer with enough empathy to latch on to, just as he was about to drag us all into the darkest corners of the character's psyche. No show had done so cinematically before, and it's totally open to debate if any will ever reach such heights again. If Tony had been miscast, there's no way "The Sopranos" would have lasted 86 episodes and refashioned the tube in its own image. Instead, Gandolfini annihilated the role for eight years.

I won't be able to attend Gandolfini's funeral tomorrow at Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in Morningside Heights, New York City. However, I offer my deepest condolences to his friends and family,

especially his wife and children. I also hope they forgive me for zeroing in just one aspect of what I'm sure was a rich and varied existence. Gandolfini produced other television projects and was a prolific character actor who starred in dozens of films. Even if his work in the films "True Romance" and "The Man Who Wasn't There" had been his only acting credits, he still would have died a legend.

But as comedian Dana Carvey wrote on his Twitter feed in reaction to the news: "In a thousand thousand years humans will watch and be moved by James Gandolfini's brilliant work of art 'Tony Soprano.'" I can't say it much better than that.

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